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Indian cuisine gets chocolate makeover

A master Indian chef at Geneva's Rasoi by Vineet is amping up Indian food in an unusual way. Chocolatey results available in December

By Savita Iyer-Ahrestani 13 November, 2012

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Sandeep Bhagwat's all-chocolate menu won't be ready for viewing -- and tasting -- until December. Till then, this collaborative gift-box effort from his team at Rasoi by Vineet and Geneva chocolate maker Philippe Pascoet will help us hold on.

We all know chocolate works in Mexican moles. But chocolate mixed into Indian food?

Yes, really, says Sandeep Bhagwat, chef de cuisine at Rasoi by Vineet in Geneva's Mandarin Oriental hotel and the man responsible for creating innovative chocolate-inspired dishes for the Michelin-starred Indian restaurant.

"Like wine, chocolate has everything to do with its terroir," Bhagwat says. "On the Equatorial belt, cocoa beans are cultivated alongside spices like mace, cinnamon, clove, vanilla and nutmeg, and they give chocolate the kind of flavoring that works very well with Indian food."

Bhagwat's chocolate infusions aren't about breaking a bar of Toblerone into a pot of curry.

Making this kind of fusion work means subtly blending dark chocolate of the highest quality into traditional dishes to push the boundaries of Indian cuisine, Bhagwat says.

Take the humble khichdhi, the risotto-like dish that's India's answer to comfort food.

Bhagwat makes his with basmati rice, cumin, assorted field mushrooms and chocolate with an 85 percent cocoa content to "complement the earthy taste of the mushrooms without overpowering the dish, and enhance the experience with a smooth texture and bitter flavor."

Available to public in December



COURTESY RASOI BY VINEET/MANDARIN ORIENTAL, GENEVA

Chocolate pioneer: Sandeep Bhagwat, chef de cuisine at Rasoi by Vineet.

Last year, Rasoi test-drove the mushroom khichdhi and a few other chocolate-y creations.

The dishes received such rave reviews from diners that the restaurant decided to have Bhagwat put together an entire chocolate-inspired Indian menu.

Bhagwat is now in the process of creating six different courses (including dessert) that will be served from December 4-8. Each course will include chocolate.

He's still working out the details, but the menu could feature an item like gunpowder-crusted turbot served with saffron and chocolate soup.

"Gunpowder, as the name suggests, is a fiery South Indian mix of spices made with raw basmati rice and lentils that give a crunchy texture when pan seared [with fish]," he says.

"The soup, made with fresh coconut milk, saffron and white chocolate, is tempered with black mustard seeds, curry

leaf, ginger and green chilies. But the white chocolate sweetens it and is therefore ideal to balance the fiery gunpowder spice."

Bhagwat says chocolate can bring out the many flavors of Indian cooking in unexpected ways. This is no easy feat.

The greatest challenge is tempering the sweetness of chocolate, he says, "because too much sweet might make you feel like everything you're eating is a dessert."

Chocolate scientists

Bhagwat and his team at Rasoi have been working closely with Geneva chocolate maker Philippe Pascoet to mix and match chocolate and spice. Together, they've developed a unique set of Indian-inspired chocolates, flavored with spices like roast cumin, coffee, cardamom, fennel seeds, saffron and rose petals.

The process is a work in progress and one of ongoing experimentation.

"In Hindi, 'rasoi' means 'kitchen,' and kitchens are meant for experimenting," says Bhagwat.

Available from December 4-8, Bhagwat's six-course Chocolate Menu will be priced at CHF 160 (US\$169).

Flavors of Rasoi chocolates, handcrafted by Philippe Pascoet, are available at the restaurant in boxes of 10 for CHF 26 and boxes of 100 for CHF 190. A gift box with 27 chocolates and a bottle of Krug/Dom Perignon 2002 Champagne goes for CHF 380.

Rasoi by Vineet, Mandarin Oriental, Geneva, 1 Quai Turrettini, 1201 Geneva; www.rasoi.ch (<http://www.rasoi.ch>); +41 (0) 22 909 00 06

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